

By SSG David Gayvert

**SSG**

Smith is an exemplary soldier. With just under seven years' time in service, he's entered the secondary zone for promotion consideration and his chances are better than average. Entering the Army when he was 21 with two years of college under his belt, Smith has gone far in his brief Army career. Always seeking all the military education he can get his hands on, within his first enlistment he completed numerous MOS-related courses, graduated from the Jumpmaster and Pathfinder courses, earned the coveted Ranger Tab and got his Master Jumpwings. He was promoted to staff sergeant two weeks short of his four-year mark. He served with distinction in three major military operations: Just Cause, Desert Storm and Restore Hope. On top of all that, he earned a bachelor's degree in Political Science and is now working on a master's degree in the same field. *His monthly paycheck: \$1,674.60.*

Eighteen-year-old PVT Jones, fresh out of Initial Entry Training and newly arrived at Smith's unit, may turn out to be a good soldier, provided he receives large amounts of attention, supervision and training from the likes of SSG Smith. Jones made it through basic training, frankly, by the skin of his teeth and his performance at Advanced Individual Training was not a whole lot better. On top of that, his APFT scores are marginal and he can't shoot straight. *His monthly paycheck: \$2,186.59.*

How can this be? An accounting error perhaps? Not at all. The difference is that PVT Jones has already taken a wife—a decision SSG Smith has not yet felt compelled to make. While Smith was dodging sniper bullets in Somalia, Jones was marrying his high school sweetheart before trekking off to basic training.

[Note: These salary figures assume the soldiers are stationed at Schofield Barracks, HI, and include applicable BAQ, VHA, BAS and current COLA, but no special or propays. It is further assumed PVT Jones' wife is not a servicemember.]

These soldiers are fictitious, designed to show extremes of experience and ability—differences for which, when it comes time to put its money where its mouth is, the Army seems to have little appreciation.

Based ostensibly on his or her greater "need," a married soldier, regardless of rank, regardless of performance, is automatically granted numerous cash and "quality-of-life" entitlements not guaranteed to single enlisted soldiers until they reach the rank of sergeant first class after serving an average of eight to 12 years. Even if Smith is picked up on this

year's list, it will likely be close to two more years before he actually pins on sergeant first class stripes and claims many (but not all) of the entitlements Jones draws from his first day in the unit.

Does this make sense? Is it—and I hesitate to use the "f" word—fair? To answer these loaded questions, let's take a look at the disparities between the incomes of our two soldiers.

Shortly after arriving at his unit, Jones receives either private quarters on post or, more likely, Basic Allowance for Quarters and Variable Housing Allowance each month which enables him to live off-post. SSG Smith shares a room in the barracks with another NCO. Both are allotted 120 square feet of living space—enough for a wall locker, desk, dresser and king-sized bed. Phone, latrine and laundry facilities are shared with a dozen other soldiers on the floor.

Jones receives Basic Allowance for Subsistence which allows him to eat what (and when) he chooses. Smith receives no monetary allowance for rations and -- if he doesn't want to erode the already modest purchasing power of his monthly base pay—is constrained to eat in the unit dining facility, the hours of which do not always mesh with his college class times and other off-duty self-improvement activities.

If he's stationed in a part of the world where the cost of living is markedly higher than average, the married Jones receives a larger share of COLA than a single soldier. If he's deployed away from his wife for more than 30 days, he gets Family Separation Allowance. Smith, of course, receives no such additional monies.

**Great differences exist in the money paid single and married soldiers. Does a married soldier "need" more pay than a single soldier—regardless of rank or performance?**

When it comes time for Jones to PCS, he'll receive Dislocation Allowance (equal to two months' BAQ) to assist with moving costs. He'll get a higher per diem allowance for his authorized travel days. If he's leaving or returning to the Continental United States, he'll be granted a Temporary Lodging Allowance of up to \$138 per day (a figure that varies) to pay for a hotel room and associated costs. He and his wife could also be lodged in guest housing on his new post until

he finishes inprocessing and finds new quarters. Smith, on the other hand, receives no DLA or gets a smaller per diem and spends his first days at the new station in a temporary barracks room.

By now, you probably have at least two protests. First, you'll wonder why no mention has been made of the non-monetary allowances received by barracks residents. Your second objection will likely be that, given the much greater costs associated with marriage and family, even with the additional cash entitlements, married soldiers often have less

discretionary income than those who are single and barracks-bound. In short, they need those funds just to survive.

Even those of you conceding the general accuracy of the two fictional soldiers will point out that no financial value has been assigned to Smith's government room and board, thus distorting the salary comparison. True enough, but the missed point here is that such "payment in kind" is *not* the same as cash which can be spent as an individual sees fit. I don't know any soldiers, given the choice, who'd refuse separate rations in favor of a meal card. Moreover, the combined monthly BAQ and VHA received by Jones is \$858.22. Admittedly, this does not go far in the local housing market. Jones will probably have to rely on part of his base pay to get adequate housing. But his stipend is still a sizeable chunk of cash. Given this amount of money, would you pay the Army \$860 a month for half of a barracks room? (If you answered "yes," then I've got a deal for you.)

Life in the barracks is *not* the same as living in your own house or apartment. Not even close. In addition to the inconveniences already mentioned, barracks life normally carries with it a list of do's and don't's. Though local command policies vary, typical restrictions include limits upon the type and amount of alcohol which may be consumed or stored on the premises; guest visitation hours and the nature of activities permitted during those times; types of appliances, furniture and decor authorized for use or display; and SOPs for how the room must be arranged. There's also no question as to who will be nabbed for those last-minute, after-hours "hey you" details.

Finally, there's the issue of living away from the place of work. Putting distance between the workplace and home can be a valuable stress reliever. For those who live in the barracks—frequently just up the stairs or down the hall from their normal place of duty—the feeling that they never really leave work can sap energy and lead to job burn-out.

It seems the system offers a "marriage bonus." Just by saying "I do," a private can more than double his salary. This incentive can be hard to resist, particularly if his prospective spouse is self-supporting. At best, it persuades soldiers to get married before they're truly ready, emotionally or financially. At worst, it promotes marriages of convenience. Of course, it's hard to tell how prevalent such occurrences are, but even a few are too many.

But what about the argument that married soldiers must receive allowances not granted to single soldiers of the same rank because married soldiers clearly have a much greater need for such? Haven't we all seen cases where, even after entitlements are added in, the income of military families

with several children remains low enough to qualify them for food stamps and other forms of welfare relief? Thus, the extra money paid to married soldiers, far from being an extravagance or "unfair," is an essential provision for the basic needs of a family.

If the objection is that military salaries in general ought to be more generous, you won't hear any dissent from me. But it seems the argument here is that because they *need* more, married soldiers should be *paid* more. I reject such reasoning as wrong-headed and unfair. The Army organizes the type, amount and value of work by rank. To be sure, there are often vast differences both in the quality and quantity of work performed by soldiers of the same rank, but theoretically at least, those soldiers who consistently produce outstanding results, will be promoted faster and enjoy the privileges and salary that come with higher rank. So far, so good.

Unfortunately, this is where the logic ends. If the worth of the labor of a staff sergeant with six years of service is judged to be \$1,584 plus change each month, how does that labor suddenly become worth hundreds of dollars more as a result of a purely voluntary change in personal lifestyle? The answer is, of course, it doesn't. The fact that one needs more money because of personal choices is not the responsibility of that individual's employer, but of

the individual himself. Should I be paid more because I decide to change my life by buying a Porche 911 and now need \$500 more each month to cover the car payment?

To those who would dismiss all these objections as just so much whining and point out that a military career has never been about money, but about national service, I would answer that the Army itself, with its multi-million dollar advertising budget, emphasizes the material benefits waiting for potential enlistees rather than the sacrifices they'll be called upon to make. Even those motivated by ideals of patriotism, duty and honor aren't immune to those inducements which improve their material quality of life.

To sum up, single enlisted soldiers are not compensated at a rate equivalent to their married counterparts. The "payment-in-kind" afforded to unmarried soldiers does *not* equal the entitlements granted to the servicemember with a spouse and children. This disparity is greatest in the ranks below sergeant first class, but differentials in Cost of Living and Permanent Change of Station allowances result in married soldiers always receiving greater cash entitlements. No amount of BOSS (Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers) dances, cookouts or day trips can balance this tipped scale. ■

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